



Plymouth's 375th: The Mayflower voyage



Joe Lippincott/The Patriot Ledger

Dressed in period costume, Michael Robbins, 13, of Hanson experiences life as a 17th-century cabin boy aboard the Mayflower II.

Special Series

Another in a weeklong report on Plymouth's 375th anniversary as America's hometown



1620-1995

Today

Myles Standish, William Brewster, Priscilla Alden and William Bradford all have their place in history. But they were only the first of many drawn to Plymouth for a better life.

John Russell, Ferdinand Monti, Joao Costa and Delphina Andrade are pilgrims in their own right, representing generations of immigrants who helped create the modern Plymouth.

Joseph Nicholson and Tom Flaherty, who followed jobs and the housing market to Plymouth, are typical of another breed of newcomer: the transplanted Americans who are building the town's future.

Their stories are told in a special four-page pullout beginning on Page 7.

Mayflower II's sail: fun, fantasy and frustration

By J. Martin McOmber
The Patriot Ledger

ABOARD THE MAYFLOWER II — Sweltering in his wool and linen period costume, Michael Robbins understood the misery of a 17th-century cabin boy: hot sun, no wind and a ship full of adults waiting to give orders.

But nothing could ruin the day for this 13-year-old Hanson boy. After all, he was gazing at Cape Cod Bay from the half-deck of the Mayflower II.

"It's like a dream," he said, fiddling with his wool cap. "I keep waiting for someone to wake me up."

For most of the nearly 75 passengers and crew members aboard the re-created Pilgrim vessel, the voyage to Provincetown yesterday was a mixture of fantasy, fun and a little frustration.

The Mayflower II left its berth in Plymouth Harbor shortly after dawn for what was to have been the most extensive sail since its maiden voyage from England in 1957.

And for a while it looked sure to happen. The crew jumped to orders, testing the 38-year-old ship's handling under sail.

But the morning's promising winds soon quieted to a whisper and its sails hung slack. Most of the day was spent drifting on the bay's glass-calm water.

Finally, at about 3:30 p.m., the captain called for the tug.

The Mayflower II was towed the final 20 miles into Provincetown. It was met there by a flotilla of small and large pleasure craft and hundreds of people, who crowded Fisherman's Wharf to watch the 180-ton ship ease into its temporary port.

The ship is to return to Plymouth under tow Sunday morning.

Although early weather reports didn't pan out yesterday, sail master William Gates, the Mayflower II's second in command, had few regrets.

"The big picture was we could sail at all," Gates said. "The fact the weatherman predicted 10-to-15-knot winds and it didn't happen, well, that's par for the course around here."

And for the most part, no one on board seemed to mind.

Passengers and crew members passed the time in conversation, napping and snacking. Plimoth Plantation, which operates the Mayflower, offered diversions aboard, from singing 400-year-old drinking songs to dressing a group of elementary students in Pilgrim garb.

Passenger Peter Gomes, chaplain of Harvard University's Memorial Church, gave the wait a philosophical bent.

"I find it a great irony that the Pilgrims fled as fast as they could from Provincetown, and now we are laboring slowly to get back," he said.

But speedy travel wasn't the point of the excursion. History was.

It didn't take much for passengers to get a taste of the past. Lessons were all around them.

Beads of sweat rolled down Keith White's face as he stared at the compass. Dressed in costume, the Plymouth resident stood in the cabin below the half-deck, his hands gripping the thick wooden pole, called a whip staff, used to steer the ship.

Maneuvering a 17th-century merchant vessel was not an easy task. Ship's wheels were a new and complicated technology then, and most boats relied on the whip staff.

Below decks, seamen couldn't see where the ship was heading during their hour-long watches. The only portal to the outside was a 1¼-foot square conning hatch directly overhead; it enabled them to keep an eye on the sails' trim and listen for officers' orders.

Ships like the slow and lumbering Mayflower took their time responding to the helm, as White found when he took the whip staff for the first time at sea.

"It's a little hesitant at first, a little stiff," he said after pulling the pole to the left. "You have to be careful not to overcompensate."

On deck, Michael Caliri descended the main mast's rat lines, his hands, clothes and shoes stained black from the tar-covered ropes.

Caliri's job combined sweat and danger. When the heavy linen sails were dropped and furled, he was standing on a rope 60 feet above deck, working the ship's yardarms

"I very rarely look down," said Caliri, who lives in Orleans. "If it gets rough, you can really feel it."

Like the rest of the crew — a mix of volunteers and museum staff members — Caliri spent more than four hours a week for the past two months training for the voyage. The sheer amount of physical work taught him something more than how to sail the ship, however.

"I have muscles that I didn't even know I had," he said.

Despite the strains, Caliri said that if he had been born 400 years ago, he'd have chosen a life at sea.

"I like to travel, and this is the way they got around back then," he said. "Of course, I'd like to go as an officer."

It would certainly be a step up from common seaman, Gates said.

Gates is a Mayflower II veteran, having worked on the ship from 1984 to 1989. He now pilots a smaller, square-rigged ship in Maryland. He spent most of his day yesterday on the half-deck. That was the domain of officers, a place where common seamen stepped only to perform certain tasks. Even then, sailors had to stay downwind of their officers.

In the socially ordered world of the 1600s, fraternization between officers and crew simply didn't take place. The perks of commanding were many, including better sleeping arrangements and first dibs on food.

Gates said life as a common sailor also had opportunities.

"It was tough, it was dangerous, the food was bad and so was the company," he said. "But it was one of the few professions in the 17th century that a peasant could better himself by getting a promotion to ship's officer."

Diane Finn, an elementary school teacher in Plymouth, wasn't looking for a promotion. She was more interested in discovering a link with history.

Finn, one of four grade school teachers on board, walked around the ship, taking note of the smells, sights and sounds.

"This has been a thrill of a lifetime," she said. "It's an experience I'll never forget."

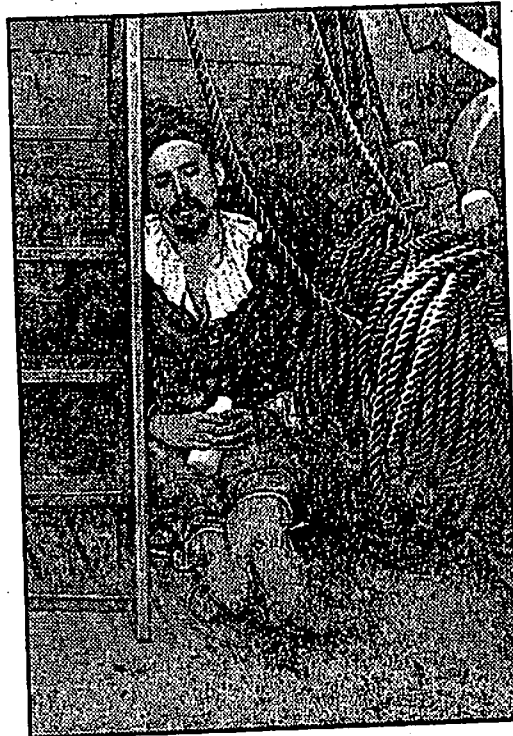
Voyage of Discovery



Lisa Bul/The Patriot Ledger

The Mayflower II leaves Plymouth Harbor shortly after dawn yesterday. The ship is to return to Plymouth under tow Sunday.

Ship's master Ted
Curtain of Plymouth,
right, is a former
submarine skipper.
During the voyage,
crew member Steve
Ewald of Plymouth
naps on deck, far right.



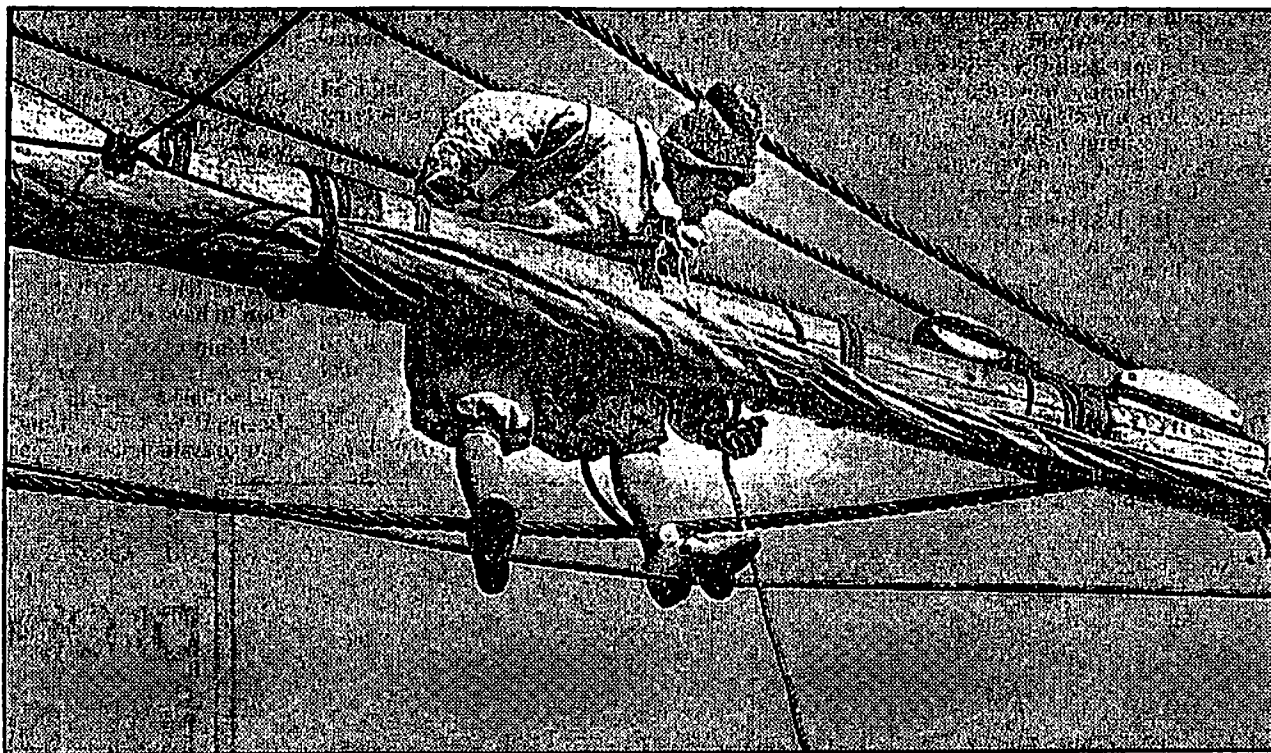
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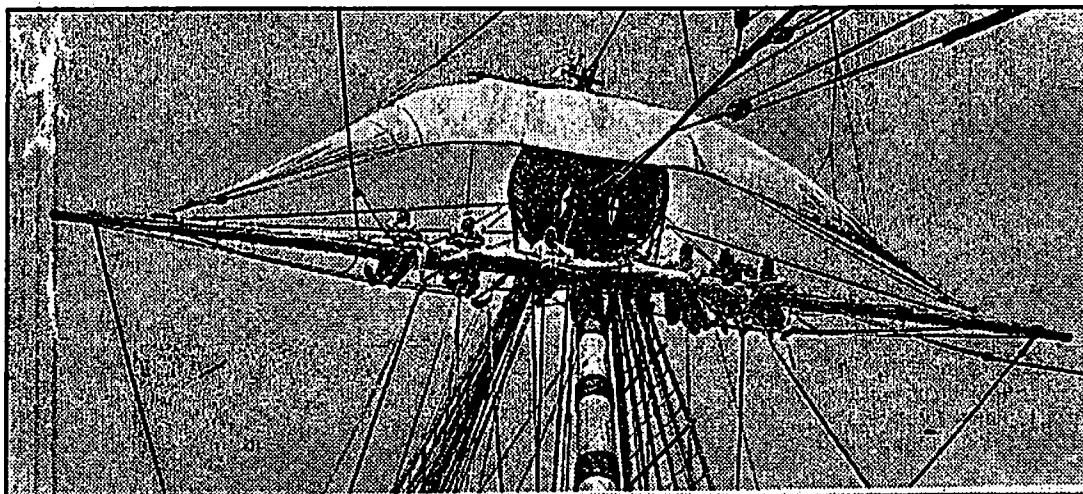
While under way, Marietta Mullen,
right, admires the crochet work by
Colleen Murphy Chartier. Both
women are from Plymouth.



Wind lifts the sails of the Mayflower II on its way to Provincetown



A Mayflower II crew member readies a sail to be unfurled.



Several sailors go aloft to unfurl the ship's main sail as it prepares for voyage.